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ABSTRACT

A small number of studies conducted during the 1980's provide insights into the magnitude of transfer activity and the characteristics of students who are likely to transfer. The studies, based occasionally on state data and more frequently on secondary analyses of the U.S. Department of Education's longitudinal databases, reveal that: (1) transfer rates for entering community college students range from 20% to 29%; (2) men are more likely to transfer than women; (3) minority students are less likely to transfer than white students; (4) students from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to transfer than those from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds; (5) students who take an academic program in high school are more likely to transfer than students enrolled in vocational or general tracks; (6) students who earn higher grades at the community college, enroll on a full-time basis, and take more math and science courses are more likely to transfer than those who earn lower grades, enroll part-time, and avoid math and science courses; (7) students who are more engaged with community college campus life (who live or work on campus) are more likely to transfer than students who merely commute to classes; and (8) students transfer at almost any point after enrollment at the community college, with the number who obtain an associate degree varying greatly from study to study. However, these findings, valuable as they are, present the community colleges as a unitary construct, rather than a set of different institutions. Research must begin now to assess the effects of variables that maybe reasonably expected to contribute to transfer, such as the strength of the liberal arts curriculum, transfer arrangements, and matriculation and guidance services. (JSP)

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by

James Palmer

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Although transfer activity between community colleges and four-year schools is receiving a great deal of national attention, we still have a long distance to travel in order to answer basic questions about the transfer function. James Palmer, Associate Director of the Center for Community College Education at George Mason University, addresses three critical questions about transfer: What is the magnitude of transfer? Who transfers? When do students transfer? "What Do We Know About Transfer?" was presented at the 1991 convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges in Kansas City, Missouri, April 16, 1991.

Judith S. Eaton, Director
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What Do We Know About Transfer?

by

James Palmer

Assessments of transfer activity are difficult to make, because the available empirical base is weak. The lack of transfer rate data, collected consistently and according to standard definitions, has made it difficult to analyze trends in transfer over time. Untoward research methodologies have also left many questions unanswered. For example, when assessments of the community college transfer function have been conducted, they often treat community colleges as homogeneous institutions that are compared with equally homogeneous four-year colleges. This is evident in the relatively large body of studies (reviewed by Dougherty [1987]) that compare the baccalaureate attainment rates of community college students with the baccalaureate attainment rates of native four-year college students. The findings consistently--and predictably--show that native four-year college students are more likely to earn the bachelor's degree than community

college students. But these findings mask variances between community colleges and thus say little about where community colleges serve as strong links between high schools and baccalaureate-granting institutions and where they do not. Hence, the transfer process itself remains shrouded as a black-box phenomenon (Cohen and others, 1985).

Nonetheless, a small number of studies conducted during the 1980s, and listed in a bibliography recently published by the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer (1991), provides useful insights into the magnitude of transfer activity and the characteristics of students who are likely to transfer. The findings generated by these studies should be viewed cautiously, because the question of whether or not they can be generalized to the population of all community colleges remains open. Based occasionally on state data and more frequently on secondary analyses of the United States Department of Education's longitudinal data bases[1], these studies do not illuminate the inner workings of the black box, but they help us understand its contours. Recognizing these limitations, this paper briefly outlines what these studies have to say about three questions: What is the magnitude of transfer? Who transfers? and When do students transfer?

What is the Magnitude of Transfer?

Researchers calculating transfer rates for students entering the community college have had remarkably similar results, ranging from 20 to 29 percent. For example, Adelman (1988) traced the postsecondary experiences of students who were high school seniors in 1972 over a 12-year period. He determined that one out of five students who enrolled at a community college eventually showed up at a four-year institution. In another study, Lee and Frank (1989) examined the college attendance patterns of students who were high school seniors in 1980, determining that of those entering a community college, 24 percent transferred. Grubb (1990, 1991) analyzed both the 1972 and 1980 cohorts, concluding that the transfer rate of the former was 29 percent and the transfer rate for the latter was 20 percent.

The similarity in findings might be explained by the fact that each of these researchers uses the same data bases. But it is interesting to note that other researchers using different data sets have come to the same conclusion. The aggregate transfer rates calculated by both the Transfer Assembly Project and the National Effective Transfer Consortium hover at 25 percent. During 1990-91, 112 community colleges participating in the Transfer Assembly Project calculated transfer rates for first-time students who entered their colleges in the fall of 1985. The average transfer rate for the colleges was 23 percent, with a range of approximately two percent to 78 percent (Cohen, 1991). Twenty-five community colleges participating in the National Effective Transfer Consortium calculated transfer rates for the cohort of students who were enrolled in the spring of 1988 but who did not enroll in the fall of 1988; the average transfer rate was 25 percent with a range of 12 to 40 percent (Berman and others, 1990).

Numerous transfer rates based on analyses of state and local data have been reported in the literature (Cohen, 1990). The rates are as varied as the methodologies used to calculate them. But from a national perspective, it appears that, on average, at least one out of five community college students transfers.

Who Transfers?

Much of the research focuses on the characteristics of students who succeed in transferring. Findings reveal that academic preparation, socioeconomic status, and student aspirations are all correlated with the probability of transfer. Turning again to the national longitudinal studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, researchers looking at transfer from a national perspective suggest, among other findings, the following:

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[1]Two longitudinal studies figure prominently in analyses of transfer. The first is the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, involving a sample of students who were high school seniors in 1971-72. The second is the High School and Beyond Study, involving a sample of students who were high school seniors in 1979-80.

- that men are more likely to transfer than women (Grubb, 1990, 1991; Lee and Frank, 1989);
- that minority students are less likely to transfer than white students (Grubb, 1990, 1991)[2];
- that students from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to transfer than students from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds (Grubb, 1990, 1991; Lee and Frank, 1989; Valez and Javalgi, 1987);
- that students who take an academic program in high school are more likely to transfer than students enrolled in vocational or general tracks (Grubb, 1990, 1991; Lee and Frank, 1989; Valez and Javalgi, 1987);
- that students who devote more time to their studies in high school and take more challenging academic classes are more likely to transfer than students who devote less time to their studies while in high school (Lee and Frank, 1989);
- that students who earn higher grade point averages while in high school are more likely to transfer than students who earn lower grade point averages (Lee and Frank, 1989; Valez and Javalgi, 1987);
- that students who earn higher grades at the community college, enroll on a full-time rather than part-time basis, and take more math and science courses are more likely to transfer than those who earn lower grades, who enroll on a part-time basis, and who avoid math and science courses (Lee and Frank, 1989);
- that students who are more engaged with campus life at the community college--who, for example, hold a job on campus or who live on campus--are more likely to transfer than students who drive to the campus, take classes and drive away (Valez and Javalgi, 1987); and
- that students who aspire to higher degrees are more likely to transfer than students who do not aspire to higher degrees (Grubb, 1990, 1991; Valez and Javalgi, 1987).

These are not surprising findings; they "confirm conventional patterns" (Grubb, 1991, p. 199). For example, the lower transfer rates for minority students are unfortunately predictable, given the fact that attrition for minorities is greater than the attrition of white students at all levels of the educational pipeline. Thus, the same factors that mitigate against educational advancement generally, mitigate against transfer specifically. In this regard, community college educators share common concerns with colleagues at all educational levels.

When Do Students Transfer?

Research also verifies the fact that students transfer at almost any point after enrollment at the community college. Some transfer after earning an associate degree, while others transfer with fewer than 15 credits earned at the community college. In his analysis of the college experiences of 1980 high school graduates, for example, Grubb (1990) determined that 27 percent of the students transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions had earned an associate degree or other credential prior to transfer. State studies provide other indices of the varying role of the community college as a way-station to the university. The Florida State Board of Community

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[2]Analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, Valez and Javalgi (1987) determined that blacks and Hispanics had a higher probability of transferring than whites when other variables, such as socioeconomic status, are controlled. They posit that this is a consequence of the unseen sorting process that helps shape the sample used in their analysis (students who were high school seniors in 1972). Because the high school drop out rates for minorities are substantially higher than the high school drop out rates of whites, those minorities who make it to the senior year may be exceptionally strong students. As Valez and Javalgi explain: "They [minority students] may be qualitatively different from white students to the extent that they are more academically oriented and have a stronger commitment to finishing college once they have started, while possibly a larger proportion of white students are ambivalent about college and are simply 'killing time' before entering the labor force" (p. 91).

Colleges (1988), for example, reports that most transfer students in the state (approximately 80 percent) transfer 60 or more units to the senior institution. Data compiled by the State University of New York (1990) indicate that 60 percent of the students transferring from a SUNY community college to a SUNY four-year college in the fall of 1989 had earned an associate degree. In Illinois, a five-year longitudinal study of community college students transferring to senior institutions in 1979 revealed that 38 percent had earned the associate degree while 44 percent had earned 60 or more credits prior to transfer (Illinois Community College Board, 1986).

Some of these variances are due to differences in the ways states count transfer students and perhaps to differences between states in the way associate degrees are written into articulation agreements. But the important point remains: Because community college students may transfer before completing an associate degree, the act of transfer itself does not signify that the student has met a specific standard of achievement. Thus, the community college contribution to the undergraduate education of those who go on to four-year colleges varies from student to student.

Given this variability, the question naturally arises if students are better off completing two full years at the community college before transferring. The research presents mixed findings. Studies in Illinois and Arizona suggest that transfers with the associate degree outperform transfers without the degree in terms of persistence at the four-year college and baccalaureate degree attainment (Richardson and Doucette, 1980; Illinois Community College Board, 1986). But Grubb's (1990, 1991) recent national analysis of the High School and Beyond data base suggests that the advantage of the associate degree may have diminished. Comparing the educational experiences of the 1972 high school graduates with the 1980 high school graduates, he found that the baccalaureate attainment rate of transfer students with the associate in arts or associate in science degrees was 61 percent for the 1972 cohort but only 12 percent for the 1980 cohort. Though associate degree holders in both cohorts were more likely to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree than community college students who did not earn a credential, Grubb hypothesizes that the role of the associate in arts and associate in science degrees as a path to the baccalaureate has been considerably weakened.[3]

The Unanswered Question

The published, and hence available, research substantiates what we have long known: that a minority of all community college students transfer; that some students are more likely to transfer than others; and that students transfer at any point in time after enrolling at the community college. But these findings, valuable as they are, present the community college as a unitary construct rather than as a set of different institutions. Hence, they do not tell the whole story, because they do not note or explain variations between community colleges in the way the institutions carry out the transfer function. For example, the national transfer rate may be approximately 25 percent, but this national figure masks variations between colleges. An examination of the root causes of these variations will be key to further understanding of transfer.

How should these variations be examined? Certainly not by rank-ordering colleges according to their transfer rates and arguing that those at the top of the list are better transfer institutions than those at the bottom. Transfer rate data are value free, saying nothing about how transfer is facilitated. A more meaningful approach would be to examine variations in transfer as a function of those variables that we may reasonably expect will contribute to student flow. For example, these variables might include, among many others, the following:

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[3]The relatively large size of the decline of the baccalaureate attainment rates for transfer students who had earned academic associate degrees (from 61 percent to 12 percent) begs further analysis. Perhaps the size of the decline is an artifact of the relatively small number of students involved. Only 7.5 percent of the community college students in the 1972 cohort and 5.7 percent of the students in the 1980 cohort earned an academic associate degree. Of these, 69 percent and 49 percent (respectively) transferred to a four-year college within four years. Because a relatively small number of students are involved, minor changes in the absolute number of students earning the baccalaureate may result in relatively large changes in the percentage of students earning the degree.

function of those variables that we may reasonably expect will contribute to student flow. For example, these variables might include, among many others, the following:

- *Strength of the liberal arts curriculum.* Those community colleges with a full range of liberal arts offerings, including sophomore courses as well as introductory classes, will be expected to have higher transfer rates than colleges with weaker transfer offerings.
- *Transfer arrangements.* Community colleges that make a substantial investment in interinstitutional, regional, or state articulation arrangements will have higher transfer rates than community colleges that have few or no transfer arrangements with four-year colleges.
- *Matriculation and guidance.* Those colleges that assess student skills, require remediation where necessary, enforce course prerequisites, and monitor student progress may be expected to have higher transfer rates than those colleges that leave students to their own devices.

Such analyses need not be complicated. Their purpose is not to determine the correlations of the numerous social, economic, demographic or other variables that may potentially affect an institution's transfer rate. Nor are these analyses judgmental; no rank-orderings of colleges need be published. The purpose of these analyses, rather, is to test our assumptions about what works in promoting transfer. The availability of transfer rate indicators collected by individual colleges according to a consistent definition will enable us to study variations between colleges in ways that replace speculation with evidence.

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